Kashmiri cricketer under fire as his helmet displays Palestinian flag

By Our Correspondent

NEW DELHI: Police in India-occupied Kashmir summoned a local cricketer for questioning on Friday after a video showing him wearing a helmet bearing a Palestinian flag sparked online outrage.

According to the *Indian Express* newspaper, police initiated a 14-day preliminary inquiry after the video circulated on social media, purportedly showing Furqanul Haq, a resident of Pulwama, wearing the helmet during a local league match in Jammu.

Police said the inquiry was ordered in view of the "sensitivity of the matter and its potential public order implications" and would examine the facts, the cricketer's intent, and any possible linkages.

Under the law, police can conduct preliminary inquiries with prior permission from a deputy superintendent of police for cognisable offences punishable by three to seven years of imprisonment.

The controversy occurred during a match of the Jammu and Kashmir Champions League at Muthi, 10 kilometres from Jammu, after Furqan walked in to bat for his team, JK Eleven Kings, against Jammu Trail Blazers.

A *Times of India* (TOI) report stated some players from the opposing side objected to the helmet sticker, following which Furqanul Haq was sent back and took no

further part in the match.

Both Furqan and the organisers of the tournament were later called to a police station for questioning.

The Jammu and Kashmir Cricket Association distanced itself from the episode. "The JKCA has nothing to do with this. It involves local players. Even spectators are not allowed. Police will take necessary action," an official told the *TOI*.

Support for Palestinian cause

The controversy drew political reactions. Former Jammu and Kashmir chief minister and Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) president Mehbooba Mufti expressed support for the Palestinian cause on social media.

"From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free. A flag in the wind, bold and free, From the river to the sea," she posted on X.

Cambodia urges Thailand to withdraw troops

PHNOM PENH: Cambodia called on neighbouring Thailand on Saturday to pull out its forces from areas Phnom Penh claims as its own, one week since a truce halted deadly clashes along their disputed border.

The decades-old dispute between the Southeast Asian neighbours erupted into military clashes several times last year, with fighting in December killing dozens of people and displacing around one million on both sides.

The two countries agreed a truce on Dec 27. Cambodia says Thailand seized several areas across four provinces.—AFP

RUSTEM Umerov (second left), the Ukraine president's chief security adviser, and Prime Minister Yulia Svyrydenko (third left) attend a meeting with officials from Nato and European allies in Kyiv.—AFP

Ukraine's allies in Kyiv for talks on plan to end war

KYIV: Security advisers from Ukraine's top allies met in Kyiv on Saturday for talks on a US-brokered plan to end the war with Russia, days after Kyiv announced a deal was "90 per cent" ready.

Officials from 15 countries including Britain, France and Germany as well as representatives from Nato and the European Union joined the meeting, the first of several planned for the new year.

US special envoy Steve Witkoff also joined virtually, a Ukrainian official said, though the United States' large-scale military attack on Venezuela earlier in the day overshadowed proceedings. A follow-up summit of European leaders was expected to take place in France on Tuesday, according to Ukraine.

"National security advisers from European countries have arrived in Kyiv," Ukraine's chief negotiator Rustem Umerov said in a post on Telegram. He announced in a later post that the meeting had started.

"The first part of the meeting focused on framework documents, including security guarantees and approaches to the peace plan, as well as the sequence of further joint steps," he said.

Diplomatic efforts to end Europe's deadliest conflict since World War II have gained pace in recent weeks, though both Moscow and Kyiv remain at odds over the key issue of territory in a post-war settlement.

Russia, which occupies around 20 percent of Ukraine, is pushing for full control of the country's eastern Donbas region as part of a deal. But Kyiv has warned ceding ground will embolden Moscow and said it will not sign a peace deal that fails to deter Russia from invading again.

Deadly strikes

Saturday's meeting capped a week marked by deadly strikes, as well as a Russian claim — denied by Ukraine — that Kyiv had launched drones at a residence of President Vladimir Putin in an unsuccessful attack.

Russia accused Kyiv of firing drones at a hotel and cafe in the Moscow-held part of Ukraine's southern Kherson region, killing what it said were 28 people celebrating the New Year. Ukraine says it was a military gathering.

A woman and three-year-old child died in a Russian missile strike on Ukraine's second largest city of Kharkiv, according to the region's governor. And early Saturday, Russian bombardment of a Kyiv-held part of the southern Kherson region left two people dead, according to the region's governor.

Russia made bigger advances on the battlefield last year than in any other year since it launched its invasion in 2022, according to an analysis of data from the Institute for the Study of War. As the year kicked off, Zelensy announced sweeping changes to his top circle, naming a new chief of staff and defence minister on Friday while announcing plans on Saturday to replace several regional leaders.

Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, describing it as a "special military operation" to prevent the expansion of Nato — a war aim that Kyiv has called a lie.

Moscow has since fired on Ukrainian towns and cities in daily drone and missile attacks while waging battles that have reduced entire urban areas to rubble. —AFP

Indian pilot found under influence of alcohol, removed from plane

NEW DELHI: Canada's transport regulator has asked Air India to investigate an incident of a pilot who was removed from a plane before it was due to take off and found to be under the influence of alcohol, a person familiar with the matter said.

Two breathalyser tests conducted by Canadian police at Vancouver International Airport showed the pilot was unfit for duty, the person said on Friday. The incident was labelled as a "serious matter" by Transport Canada in a letter to Air India and authorities are likely to pursue enforcement action, the person added.

The person requested anonymity as they were not authorised to speak to the media. In a statement on Saturday, Transport Canada said it would engage with Air India and India's aviation regulator to ensure "appropriate follow-up actions" are taken.

In a statement, Air India said the flight from Vancouver to Delhi on Dec 23 experienced a last-minute delay due to the incident, adding that an alternate pilot was brought in to operate the flight. The airline said Canadian authorities raised concerns about the pilot's fitness for duty but did not provide details.

"The pilot has been taken off flying duties during the process of inquiry. Air India maintains a zero-tolerance policy towards any violation of applicable rules and regulations," Air India said.

"Pending the outcome of the investigation, any confirmed violation will attract strict disciplinary action in line with company policy." The aircraft was a Boeing 777, a model that can seat up to 344 passengers, according to the websites of Flightradar24 and Air India.—Reuters

A 'constitutional wedding' in Kerala

By Our Correspondent

NEW DELHI: A sub-registrar's office in the Indian state of Kerala saw a rekindling of faith in an otherwise abused and undermined constitution on New Year's day as Sheetal and Jithin tied the knot under the Special Marriage Act in a ceremony unlike any other, according to *The Hindu*.

The newspaper reported in its Saturday issue that instead of traditional nuptial vows, the couple exchanged copies of the Indian constitution, making it a "constitutional wedding" as it were.

"We wanted our wedding to reflect the ideals of the constitution, and to celebrate simplicity," said Ms Sheetal and Mr Jithin after the ceremony, which was completely free of formalities.

Only a handful of friends were present to witness the model wedding.

The couple signed a marriage pledge inspired by the preamble to India's constitution, turning their union into a celebration of constitutional values. They also distributed pamphlets highlighting these principles, sharing the spirit of the occasion with those around them.

Jithin, from Ayaloor in Palakkad, works as a village assistant in a vllage, while Ms Sheetal, from Karunagappally in Kollam, is a teacher at a higher secondary school.

Sheetal had earlier worked as a constitution trainer in a project run by Kollam's panchayat.

Swiss investigate bar managers after deadly blaze

CRANS MONTANA: The managers of the Swiss ski resort bar where dozens died during a fire at a New Year's celebration are under investigation for negligent manslaughter, authorities said on Saturday.

French couple Jacques and Jessica Moretti owned and managed Le Constellation bar in Crans-Montana, which was crammed with young partygoers when a blaze began in a packed basement at around 1:30am on Thursday.

Forty people were killed and 119 injured, most of them seriously, according to the latest toll.

Dozens of those badly burnt were taken to nearby countries for urgent treatment, while authorities pointed the finger at lit sparklers attached to champagne bottles igniting foam on the ceiling.

"A criminal investigation was opened last night against the two managers of the bar," police and public prosecutors in the southwestern Swiss canton of Wallis said in a statement.

"They are charged with manslaughter by negligence, bodily harm by negligence and arson by negligence."

The authorities recalled that "the presumption of innocence applies", and a police spokesman said the pair had not yet been detained.

First fatalities identified

The announcement came shortly after the first bodies pulled from the bar were identified: four young Swiss nationals, two of them just 16 years old.

Police said the bodies had been returned to their families as efforts continue to identify the other victims. Six of those injured also remain unidentified, police said.

Many of those injured were foreign nationals, and given Crans-Montana's international popularity, non-Swiss citizens are also expected to figure among the dead.

"Switzerland is profoundly saddened," Justice Minister Beat Jans told reporters near a makeshift memorial outside Le Constellation, overflowing with flowers, candles and messages of grief and support.

"It's incredibly emotional to see the place and realise how strong the power of these flames must have been," he said, after visiting the less-damaged first-floor section of the bar.

"You can smell it... You can see the damage that was caused by these flames, they must have been incredibly intensive. 500, 600 degrees even on the top floor," he said. "It was an enormous tragedy."

Swiss authorities warned it could take days to identify everyone who perished, leaving an agonising wait for family and friends, while desperate appeals to find those missing circulated online.

The question of whether safety standards were respected has been debated ever since the devastating blaze. Jacques Moretti insisted to the Swiss press that all safety norms were followed at the bar, which according to the Crans-Montana website had a capacity of 300 people plus 40 on its terrace.

But even before charges were brought against the couple, Wallis chief prosecutor Beatrice Pilloud said safety norm compliance was a key focus of the investigation.

She told reporters that the leading hypothesis was that "sparklers or Bengal candles attached to champagne bottles and lifted too close to the ceiling" had ignited the deadly blaze. One video shared on social media showed the low wooden ceiling — covered with soundproofing foam — catching alight and the flames spreading quickly, as revellers continued to dance, unaware of the death trap they were in. Once they realised, panic set in.—AFP

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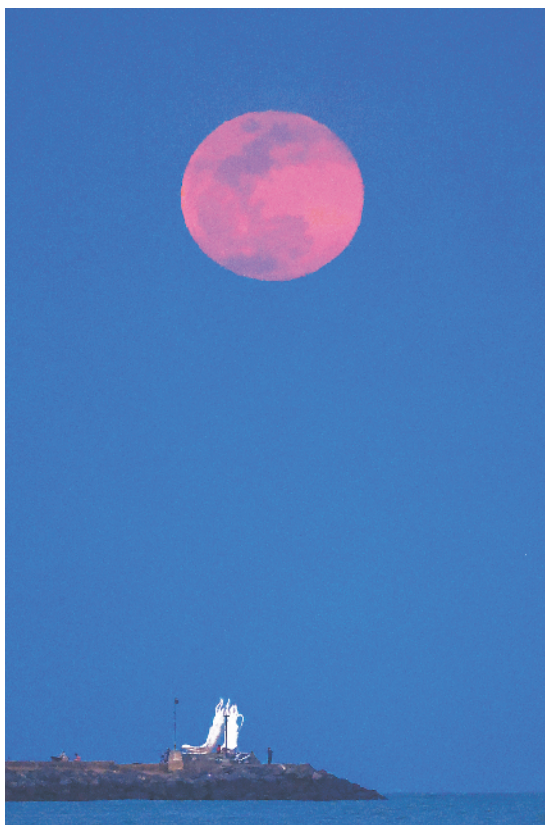
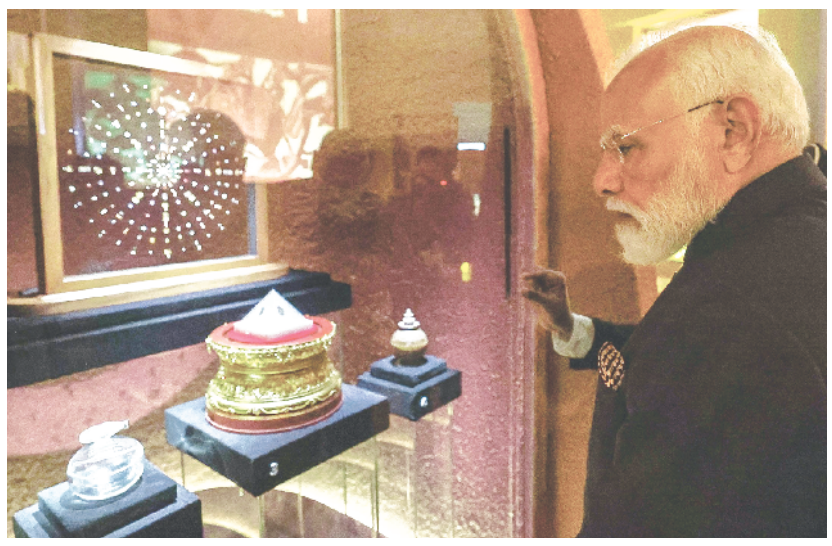


PHETCHABURI: A supermoon, the first supermoon of this year, rises above the sea at Cha-Am Beach, in Thailand.—Reuters

MANILA: Dancers are being showered with water during a ritual celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ.—AFP



INDIA'S Prime Minister Narendra Modi looks at gems linked to the Buddha during an exhibition in New Delhi.—AFP

India unveils Buddha gems after century abroad

NEW DELHI: Sacred ancient gems linked to the Buddha were unveiled on Saturday in India for the first time since their colonial-era removal.

The Piprahwa gems, a collection of more than 300 precious stones and ornaments believed to have been buried with relics of the Buddha at a stupa site in northern India, were formally displayed at an exhibition in New Delhi.

"This historic event marks the reunification of the Piprahwa gem relics of Lord Buddha, repatriated after 127 years," the Ministry of Culture said in a statement.

It said that they are on display "for the first time" since British excavations in 1898 unearthed them and they were subsequently scattered across the world.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who opened the exhibition, said it was a "very special day for those passionate about history, culture and the ideals" of the Buddha.

The Buddha — who renounced material wealth to embrace and preach a life of non-attachment — founded a religion that now has more than 500 million adherents. Born in what is now Nepal, he spent much of his life in northern India.

The gems, believed to date back to around 200 BC, were unearthed in 1898 by British colonial engineer William Claxton Peppe in Piprahwa, in Uttar Pradesh state.

Indian authorities said an inscription on one of the caskets unearthed with the treasure confirmed the contents — which include bone fragments — as "relics of the Buddha".—AFP

KATHMANDU: Hindu devotees take a dip in a river on the occasion of the Swasthani Brata Katha festival.—AFP

SAVONA: A migrant writes his diary during sunrise onboard the *Ocean Viking,* a rescue ship operated by an NGO. The ship rescued 33 migrants from an oil tanker after it developed some mechanical fault off Italy.—AFP